Organize It

A Software Blueprint To Manage Your Media

Loaded with huge hard drives and speedy processors, today's PCs have plenty of power for manipulating all kinds of digital media. High-resolution pictures from your digital camera, great-sounding music files, and DVD movies all have a place on your computer—but only if you have the software to view, edit, and play them.

How can you get started? Check out these key applications that will turn your PC into a digital media manipulation machine.

Picasa 1.6

Before digital cameras, there were two types of photo organization: tossing your prints into a shoebox (allegedly to be sorted sometime in the future, which would never come) or carefully organizing them in an album or scrapbook. Digital cameras complicate things. We feel free to take more pictures and are likely to save them all (even the mediocre ones). So, more than ever, we need a way to organize them. There's no need for the pictures on your PC to resemble the disarray of the shoebox.

Picasa is a handy app for keeping your digital photos organized by sorting, editing, printing, and emailing them. Formerly a $30 investment, in 2004 Google bought Picasa and now gives the program away.

Picasa can import images from your digicam, as well as search your hard drive for the images. (As you add pictures, the Watch Folders will find them automatically.) When it has collected your images, the program lets you sort images by date, write descriptions, and assign keywords. You can also find images easily using the scrolling timeline.

Picasa also includes a basic picture editor: You can crop and rotate images, fix red-eye, and correct color and contrast with the Enhance button. Once images are cropped and enhanced to perfection, you can print them, send them to a photo lab, email them to friends, watch a slideshow, post them to your blog (at Blogger.com, for example, also owned by Google), or export an album as a Web page.

Picasa's intuitive interface will turn your mishmash of digital photos into a manageable collection of great-looking shots. (For more on Picasa, see page 65 of the May 2003 issue of *CPU*.)

Picasa 1.6
Free
Google
www.picasa.com

Three For The Road

What can you use to get your digital media fix when you're away from the PC? Hook up with one of these three portable media devices.

Apple iPod

Apple's iPod is the quintessential portable music player. Add a color screen and the ability to view pictures, and you've got the iPod photo (www.apple.com/ipodphoto). With 40GB ($499) or 60GB ($599) of space, the iPod photo can hold up to 15,000 songs or 25,000 photos, viewable on the unit itself or a TV set.

Aiwa XDM-S710BT

For music on the go, the Aiwa XDM-S710BT (price not set; www.us.aiwa.com) does more than an average MP3 player. The Bluetooth interface lets you take mobile phone calls though the player and a built-in FM transmitter lets you listen to your music on the car stereo.

Epson P-2000

Rather than showing off faded, tattered pictures of the kids, you can show off pictures with the Epson P-2000 ($499.99; www.epson.com). This portable gadget has a 40GB hard drive and a 3.8-inch color screen for viewing pictures. (It can also show them on a TV set.) You can connect a printer to the device to print photos without a computer.

Want a portable video player? See page 64 for the goods.

Musicmatch Jukebox 9.0

An audio player is another essential tool. Musicmatch can handle MP3s, WMA files, and audio CDs. AutoDJ can mix your music based on genre and other criteria. The program also serves up information about your music: The Now Playing tab reveals a Web page showing that artist's discography and other details.

When you rip music, Musicmatch automatically adds artist, album, and song information to your tracks.

If you grow tired of your music, check out Musicmatch Radio, a free streaming music service that delivers 200 professionally programmed stations. You can also buy individual songs or albums from the Music Store. Need still more music? An $8 per month subscription to Musicmatch On Demand brings unlimited streaming of thousands of tunes with personalized recommendations.

The program can also burn CDs in audio, MP3, and data formats. It can create MP3s from your albums and tapes or record a radio program at a particular time of day. Also, print customized CD labels and jewel case covers.

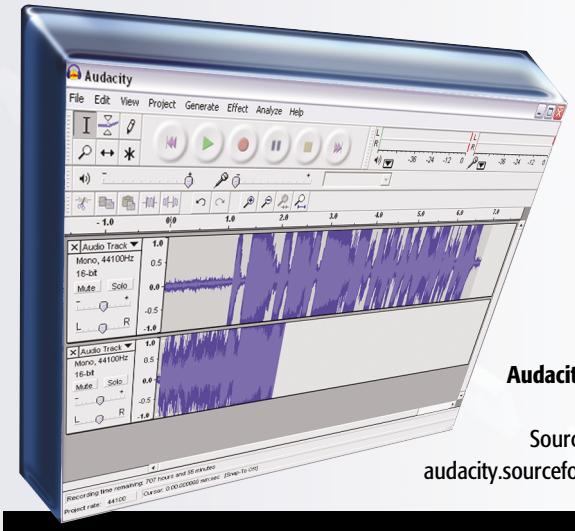
Musicmatch Jukebox 9.0
$19.99
Musicmatch
musicmatch.com

On Demand
Instant access to more than 750,000 tracks with On Demand
Try it FREE - click here
Top Tracks
1. She Will Be Loved
2. Drop It Like It's Hot
3. Over and Over
4. Lose My Breath
5. The Reason
6. My Boo
7. This Love
8. My Happy Ending
9. Go DJ
10. Just Lose It

After a few minutes, you'll have a complete inventory of your collection and be able to access it like never before.

Audacity 1.2.2

A sound editor is an important tool for your digital media manipulation toolbox. Audacity is a fantastic sound editor, just the thing for converting your old cassettes to OGG, recording and mixing your garage band's latest hit, or removing the vocals from professional recordings.



Audacity 1.2.2
Free
SourceForge
audacity.sourceforge.net

Connect any audio source to your PC's sound input jack to make a digital recording. You can do this multiple times to add additional tracks. Next, dub in or cut out audio (lopping off a lengthy song introduction, for instance). A range of effects filters let you amplify sound, fade in and out, equalize, and perform other audio adjustments.

There are plenty of features for fine-tuning sound. You can view the audio as waveforms or as a spectrogram, choose among a variety of sampling rates and encoding formats, and use the time track feature to change the rate of playback over time. If two tracks are out of synch, shift one of the tracks to correct the problem. An assortment of plug-ins is available, which add additional effects and audio-analyzing features.

Save audio in WAV, AIFF, OGG, or (with help from an external encoder) MP3. From there you can burn your custom mix to CD, export it to your portable music player, or just enjoy having digital backups.

Audacity is open-source (released under the GNU General Public License) and available for Windows, Mac OS, and Linux.

Media Player Updates

There are plenty of other media software and services to choose from, and the apps keep getting better. Here's what's new.

iTunes 4.7 (www.apple.com/itunes/download). Version 4.7 lets you search for duplicates and sends Artist Alerts when there are new songs by your favorite musicians.

Napster (www.napster.com). The latest version is a music store that lets you listen to 700,000 tracks for $9.95 per month. You can burn tracks to CD and transfer them to a portable device for 99 cents per track or $9.95 per album.

QuickTime Player 6.5.2 (www.apple.com/quicktime/download). This version supports 3GPP (3rd Generation Partnership Project) and 3GPP2. It also adds enhanced DV playback and supports Apple's audio codec.

RealPlayer 10.5 (www.real.com). With version 10.5, the new Music Store lets you buy songs for as little as 49 cents. It also supports new audio and video formats, including the ability to store music on iPods.

Sonique 2.0 Beta (sonique.lycos.com). Currently in beta, version 2 adds a new interface, improved playlist organization, and many customization options.

Paint Shop Pro 9

Sometimes your digital photos need more than a quick crop job. That's when you break out the big guns: Paint Shop Pro.

Paint Shop Pro is advanced photo-editing software. It's powerful stuff, but what we like best about PSP is that its power is accessible even to folks who aren't so talented with graphics. Paint Shop Pro's handy tutorials explain how to do all sorts of graphics chores, from the mundane to the complex.

Digital photographers will appreciate features such as Digital Camera Noise Removal (which can reduce the grain created by digital cameras at high ISO settings), the Fill Flash filter for lightening underexposed shadows, and tools for correcting lens distortion. The Straighten tool makes correcting a crooked horizon as easy as drawing a line. The program can also work directly with the RAW formats used by many brands of digital cameras.

There are tools for manipulating old-school photos, too. You can scan images directly into the program and then use the Scratch Remover tool to touch up marred pictures.

Another great feature is the collection of filters that can turn your work into art. A filter can quickly transform a plain picture into a watercolor painting, a charcoal sketch, or give it a fancy picture-frame edging. An effects browser lets you preview the result of using any of the program's hundreds of filters before applying them to your image.

Jasc Paint Shop Pro - IMG_1852
File Edit View Image Effects Adjust Layers Objects Selections Window Help
IMG_1852* @ 60% (Background)

Paint Shop Pro 9
$119 download; $129 boxed
Corel
www.jasc.com/products/paintshoppro

PowerDVD 6 Deluxe

Now for DVDs: PowerDVD supports DivX Pro, SVCD, DVD+VR, and a gaggle of other video formats. Video is always sharp and vivid. Its DVD controls match those of any hardware player, including support for subtitles, foreign languages, and switching viewing angles. There's a bookmark function that displays thumbnails for marked scenes and a screen shot tool for capturing frames.

The aspect radio controls are impressive, featuring several modes for fitting movies on your screen without losing the edges. The program will smartly fit a full-frame movie on a widescreen display and vice versa.

PowerDVD also makes movies sound great. It supports DVD-Audio, as well as DVD-Video discs. If you're using headphones or stereo speakers, it can enhance the aural range with virtual surround sound. If you have a real surround-sound setup, the program will take full advantage of it, delivering high-def audio and expanding two-channel tracks to 5.1 or 7.1. You can tailor the sound with the audio equalizer.

When you think you've got all of PowerDVD's features managed, check the tutorials area on its Web site where you will learn how to do all sorts of new tricks, such as Digital Zoom, changing the look of the interface, and using parental controls to make sure the kids are only watching G-rated flicks.

PowerDVD 6 Deluxe
$69.95
CyberLink
www.gocyberlink.com

Visual MP3 4.3 (www.iprogramdev.com). Version 4.3 adds CDDB access, improved CD ripping, and support for viewing/publishing MP3 lyrics.

Winamp 5.05 (www.winamp.com). Version 5 adds a more powerful media library and a ton of new audio effects. Winamp has also added a $14.95 Pro version that can rip music and burn CDs. Although future support might be iffy; see page 9.

WinDVD 6 Platinum (www.intervideo.com). Version 6 now supports DVD-Audio, HD Audio, and surround sound without add-on software. It can also play MPEG-4, DivX, Real, and QuickTime files.

Windows Media Player 10 (www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia). Version 10 brings a streamlined interface, support for a dozen online music stores, and support for some 70 portable players.

Bring On The Power Tools

Although Windows comes preloaded with a handful of basic media tools such as WMP and Sound Recorder, a small investment of time and money can put significantly more media manipulation power at your disposal. CPU

by Kevin Savetz